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Citation

Issue Date
2014-02-24

URL
http://hdl.handle.net/2433/182185

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Type
Journal Article

Textversion
publisher
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View online: http://dx.doi.org/10.1063/1.4866666
View Table of Contents: http://scitation.aip.org/content/aip/journal/apl/104/8?ver=pdfcov
Published by the AIP Publishing
Temperature-dependent photocarrier recombination dynamics in Cu$_2$ZnSnS$_4$ single crystals

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(Received 18 December 2013; accepted 11 February 2014; published online 24 February 2014)

Time-resolved photoluminescence (PL) measurements have been used to study the temperature-dependent photocarrier recombination dynamics in Cu$_2$ZnSnS$_4$ (CZTS) single crystals. We found a significant change of nearly four orders of magnitude of the PL decay time, from microseconds at low temperatures to subnanoseconds at room temperature. The slow PL decay at low temperatures indicates localization of the photocarriers at the band tails. Due to the large band tail states, the PL decay time depends strongly on both the photon energy and excitation density. It is pointed out that the drastically enhanced nonradiative recombination at high temperatures is one of the main factors that determine the power conversion efficiency of CZTS-based solar cells.

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The PL signal was detected by a liquid-nitrogen-cooled InGaAs photodiode array through a 30-cm monochromator.

Figure 1(a) shows the typical PL decay profiles monitored at ~1.23-eV photon energy at different temperatures under a weak excitation density of ~4 μJ/cm². The observed PL profiles are non-exponential decays and well reproduced by a sum of three exponentials, 

$$I(t) = I_1 \exp(-t/\tau_1) + I_2 \exp(-t/\tau_2) + I_3 \exp(-t/\tau_3)$$

as shown by the dashed lines. The origin of each component remains unclear. A common way to evaluate the carrier lifetime in complicated systems like CZTS is using the mean decay time. The mean decay time, determined as 

$$\langle \tau \rangle = (I_1/\tau_1 + I_2/\tau_2 + I_3/\tau_3)/(I_1 + I_2 + I_3),$$

is shown as a function of temperature in Fig. 1(b). At temperatures below 100 K, \( \langle \tau \rangle \) is estimated to be in the range of microseconds and decreases slightly with increasing temperature, but at temperatures above 100 K, \( \langle \tau \rangle \) decreases rapidly with increasing temperature to a subnanosecond value at RT.

Because CZTS is a direct-gap semiconductor, the slow decay times that we observe at low temperatures indicate the localized nature of the photogenerated carriers in the CZTS single crystals. These PL properties are different from those of conventional binary semiconductor compounds. Shortly after laser excitation, photocarriers are nonradiatively captured in spatially separated band tails, where the origins of the band tail states are the statistical potential fluctuations caused by the composition of quaternary crystals and the electrostatic potential fluctuations caused by the charged impurities and defects in CZTS.

Because thermal energies at low temperatures are insufficient, the majority of the captured carriers cannot cross the potential barriers into the conduction or valence bands and are, therefore, well localized in the ground states of the band tails. This means that radiative recombination of the localized carriers occurs through variable-range hopping motions resulting in the long microsecond-scale mean decay time \( \langle \tau \rangle \). At temperatures above 100 K, however, the temperature dependence of \( \langle \tau \rangle \) can be described approximately by the Arrhenius equation

$$\langle \tau \rangle = \tau_0 [1 + C \exp(-E_a/k_B T)]^{-1},$$

where \( E_a \) is the activation energy, and \( \tau_0 \) and \( C \) are constants.

The PL signal was detected by a liquid-nitrogen-cooled InGaAs photodiode array through a 30-cm monochromator.

FIG. 1. (a) Log-log plots of typical PL decay profiles of the monitored photon energy ~1.23 eV at different temperatures measured under a weak excitation density of ~4 μJ/cm². The dashed lines show the three-exponential-component fits. (b) The mean decay time \( \langle \tau \rangle \) as a function of temperature. The solid black line is the fitting result given by Eq. (1).
using the potential fluctuation model (the formation of band tail states). In the view point of the potential fluctuation model, the energy shift of the PL peak depends strongly on the density of the tail states in the CZTS samples. The observed blueshift of the PL peak energy indicates the existence of band-tail states with a large density of states (DOS).

The inset of Fig. 2(c) shows the time-integrated intensity of the PL band as a function of temperature measured under an excitation density of ~4 μJ/cm². As the temperature increases from 10 K to RT, the time-integrated PL intensity $I_{PL}$ exhibits a decrease of about two orders of magnitude, far smaller than that of the mean decay time $\langle \tau \rangle$. Note that the PL intensity $I_{PL}$ can be estimated as $I_{PL} \sim \langle \tau \rangle / \tau_{rad}$, where $\tau_{rad}$ is the radiative lifetime of the photogenerated carriers. The observed discrepancy between the temperature dependences of the PL intensity $I_{PL}$ and mean decay time $\langle \tau \rangle$, therefore, indicates a temperature dependence of the radiative lifetime $\tau_{rad}$. A log-log plot of the temperature dependence of $\langle \tau \rangle / I_{PL}$, which is proportional to the radiative lifetime $\tau_{rad}$, is shown in Fig. 2(c). At temperature below 100 K, $\tau_{rad}$ is almost constant, but at temperatures above 100 K, $\tau_{rad}$ decreases with increasing temperature, and at RT, it reaches a value estimated to be about one order smaller than that at low temperatures. This temperature dependence of the radiative lifetime $\tau_{rad}$ means the radiative recombination process at low temperatures is different from that near RT. The radiative recombination process at low temperatures is determined primarily by variable-range hopping motion of the photogenerated carriers, whereas thermally activated multiple trapping process takes an important role in the radiative recombination process at RT.

To investigate the photocarrier recombination dynamics in the tail states below the band edge, we examined the mean decay rate $\langle \tau \rangle^{-1}$, which depends strongly on both the PL photon energy and excitation density. Figure 3(a) shows typical decay profiles of different PL energies at 10 K under a fairly weak excitation density of ~0.4 μJ/cm²; the dashed lines are fits using the three-exponential-component equation noted earlier. The PL-photon-energy dependence of the mean decay rate $\langle \tau \rangle^{-1}$ (Fig. 3(b)) shows that $\langle \tau \rangle^{-1}$ exhibits an exponential dependence on the PL photon energy. A log-log plot of the PLE spectrum measured at 10 K (Fig. 3(b), inset) reveals a long exponential tail near the band edge (solid red line) in the PLE spectrum, indicating that the density of the band tails in CZTS single crystals has an exponential distribution. The exponential dependence of $\langle \tau \rangle^{-1}$ at 10 K is believed to be due mainly to this exponential distribution of the band-tail-state density. In addition, the observed increase in $\langle \tau \rangle^{-1}$ with the PL photon energy may be connected to the fact that the recombination of carriers localized in nearby band tails have a larger decay rate, as well as a higher emission photon energy than the recombination of carriers localized in distant band tails.

Typical PL decay profiles of the emission energy of ~1.23 eV under different excitation densities at 10 K are shown in Fig. 4(a) along with fits of the data, and Figure 4(b) shows the mean decay rate $\langle \tau \rangle^{-1}$ at 10 K as a function of excitation density. Under low excitation densities, the photogenerated carriers are localized near the lowest energy state of the band tails. As the excitation density increases, the trapped carriers tend to occupy higher-energy states with a larger band-tail DOS, which consequently leads to an increase in $\langle \tau \rangle^{-1}$ and a blueshift of the PL peak energy (consistent with the steady-state PL measurement results; data not shown). In addition, with an increase in the excitation density, the average spatial distance among the photogenerated carriers is reduced, leading to an increase in $\langle \tau \rangle^{-1}$. The excitation density dependence of the time-integrated PL intensity, also shown in Fig. 4(b), indicates a change from a linear dependence (solid black line) to a sublinear dependence (that tends toward saturation) that signals a decrease in the PL efficiency under strong excitation densities. Therefore, it is possible that nonradiative Auger recombination partly contributes to the increase in $\langle \tau \rangle^{-1}$ in the strong-excitation-density regime.
Finally, we give a brief comment about effects of drastically enhanced nonradiative recombination at high temperatures on the performance of CZTS-based solar cells. Drastically enhanced nonradiative recombination including quick capture at nonradiative sites results in the very short picosecond lifetime of the mobile carriers at high temperatures.\textsuperscript{3} The short lifetimes in turn lead to very short diffusion lengths of the mobile carriers, estimated roughly to be on the order of nanometers,\textsuperscript{29} that limit carrier collection to deep regions in the CZTS absorber layer, and consequently, CZTS-based solar cells present low power conversion efficiencies.

In conclusion, we have determined the temperature dependence of photocarrier recombination dynamics in CZTS single crystals. At low temperatures, localization of the photocarriers to the band tails results in microsecond decay time. However, nonradiative recombination becomes dominant at high temperatures, and consequently a considerable decrease of four orders of magnitude of the PL decay time was observed along with significant quenching of the PL intensity. These fast nonradiative recombination processes will have a strong influence on the power conversion efficiency of CZTS-based solar cells. Our results, therefore, provide essential knowledge for further improving the performance of CZTS-based solar cells.

This work was supported by JST-CREST and the Sumitomo Electric Industries Group CSR Foundation.